

Sermon about John 20, 11-18 on Easter Sunday 2025 in Antwerp (I)

Blessing: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Bible: 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

Opener: The Lord is risen! Dear friends, preaching is my core business as a Protestant pastor. But it's not always that easy. Especially these days, when you have to prepare at least three sermons within a week. Nico is now slowly realising what that means in his theology studies. He is due to stand here for the first time soon. I hope he's not dreading it yet. But many pastors have that problem. The tools of the business are not always easy to master. After all, we Protestants attach great importance to learning the art of preaching during our training. This is not quite the case with our Roman Catholic colleagues. Preaching has a completely different status there. And so it's no great surprise what happened to this Roman Catholic pastor. ‘The pastor has the problem that the

audience gets a bit bored and tired during his sermon. He always has the problem that basically everyone falls asleep, and he senses that this is a problem. He thinks to himself, 'I'll go to the bishop and ask what I'm supposed to do. That's what the bishop is there for.' So he goes to the bishop and tells him his problem. The bishop says: 'Good of you to come to me, pastor, I can explain to you how to do it. You also need to fill your sermons with good examples and it would be particularly good if you could also share something from your personal life. I'll give you an example: last week I was preaching in a church and I started by saying: 'Dear people, imagine I've fallen in love. And everyone thought: 'Oh, the bishop has fallen in love? Yes, it's even a married woman. Yes, what does that mean? Yes, and the man is a craftsman, a well-known man, and they also have a son. So, the pastor is all nervous and the bishop looks round the room a bit and says, 'And the woman's name is Mary. In short, that's an example, and now you know.' The next Sunday, the pastor has a service. And just before everyone falls asleep, he says: 'I've really got something new. Just imagine, I was with the bishop and he explained to me how to preach and said we need examples. So, I've brought an example with me: imagine the bishop has fallen in love.' Yes, what? Everyone stays awake and looks intently. 'Yes, with a married woman.' Yes, what? 'Yes, and her husband is a well-known craftsman and they also have a son.' And then he says: 'And I've forgotten the woman's name.'

Part One: Dear friends, a fifth time John. No, I'm not actually referring to myself. In the past weeks of the Passiontide up to and including Good Friday, we have already been given passages from the Gospel of John four times by the church for our sermons. And today, for the fifth time, the wonderful Easter story from the eyes of Mary Magdalene. A Mary too - not the one from the Easter joke that shows us how difficult it can be to spread God's word. And especially on Easter, the feast of the resurrection. The celebration of the great miracle that turns

everything upside down and makes the world shine in a new light. Who is supposed to be able to say anything meaningful or comprehensible about this? What happened here cannot be described neutrally. Easter can only be experienced - with all the senses. Because it is about love - which cannot be explained or proven, only experienced. And that is why it is good that the church has been cultivating the tradition of the 'Risus Paschalis', or Easter laughter, since at least the Middle Ages. Easter is a day of joy and laughter. Easter must go through the whole body.

Part Two: In his Gospel, John takes us on an emotional rollercoaster ride. We meet the loud-mouthed Peter, who bursts into tears in despair at the rooster's cry before the crucifixion and afterwards is ashamed but certainly relieved to feel Jesus' love. We meet the doubting disciple Thomas, who would like to believe, but cannot do it alone in his critical and rational world view, and who nevertheless finds room in Jesus' care in the end. We meet the disciple Judas, who has to go astray and perishes as a human being. And with whom we can perhaps still hope that he will find a place in God's forgiveness after receiving the Lord's Supper, because Jesus Christ died for sin. And we meet Mary Magdalene, whose love for Jesus is put to an inhumanly hard test as she watches her Lord Jesus die. Now she stands there. At the tomb in the garden. Left alone. Desperate. Full of grief. And then there is the horror: the grave is empty! And angels inside! - What does that do to her? Nothing. She weeps. The empty tomb is no proof of the resurrection. The angels do not inspire faith. There are plenty of other explanations for both. One is provided by the Gospel: The gardener has taken away the body.

But then the supposed gardener speaks to Mary: Mary! And she turns to him and recognises her Jesus in the personal address, in the mention of her name. 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine!' (Isaiah

43:1), the prophet Isaiah teaches us. And it says that Mary turns to Jesus - wait a minute! That doesn't fit at all! Mary is first turned towards the empty tomb. Then she turns to the supposed gardener - that is, to Jesus. She is already looking at him! And then she turns to him again? How can she do that? Obviously she can't recognise him through the veil of tears. Seeing doesn't help much in faith. We see this with Thomas, the empty tomb and the angels. What helps is to hear and to speak to him personally. At first, Mary only turns physically. But now, through Jesus' speech, she turns inwardly to Jesus, like a flower to the sun. Her soul becomes warm again. The one who speaks to her so lovingly cannot be dead.

Part Three: She cannot hold on to Jesus, any more than the Emmaus disciples could a day later. It is not simply a case of 'everything is back to normal'. Something completely new begins with Easter morning and the resurrection. This cannot be understood as a scientific fact. It is about relationship. It is about love. 'The love that has conquered death cannot be handled. It cannot be fixed or proven. It can only be experienced and told - and that is what Mary does.' 'Mary Magdalene goes and announces to the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord' and what he said to her.'

Aim: And what do we gain from this? We cannot grasp it with our human minds. If we try to explain it without being moved by it, we may feel like the poor priest in the joke at the beginning. Alone, we can only scratch the surface by taking note of the open grave. We cannot find Christ, life and love within ourselves. No matter how hard we try. But the Lord finds us. He speaks to us in his love. He knows us, more than we know ourselves. He calls us by name and builds a relationship with us. This creates life for us that is stronger than death, because Jesus Christ is stronger than death. We can only experience, live and tell: The Lord is risen! He is truly risen!